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ON WORLD REFUGEE DAY, UNITED STATES LEADS WORLD IN DARFUR AID

Refugee assistance promotes freedom, justice, human dignity, official says

By Charlene Porter
Washington File Staff Writer

Washington – The United States leads all international donors in supporting organizations working to ease the suffering of Sudanese refugees, according to Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees and Migration Ellen Sauerbrey in a World Refugee Day speech June 20.

More than 200,000 refugees have fled persecution and violence in the embattled Darfur region of Sudan to refugee camps in eastern Chad where U.N. organizations and nongovernmental entities are providing assistance.

In a Washington speech, Sauerbrey said the United States has contributed \$115 million to the international aid effort.

In her prepared remarks, Sauerbrey said the U.S. refugee assistance program represents a defense of human dignity, and is part of the nation's humanitarian imperative.

That imperative also has serious national security implications in today's world when repressive regimes and failed states create refugees, she said.

“As we assist victims of persecution and conflict, we transform societies and uphold the first pillar of President Bush’s National Security Strategy: promoting freedom, justice and human dignity,” she said.

Humanitarian work has become more difficult and dangerous in an era of heightened global security, however, and the United States is challenged to balance its two goals of deterring terrorist activity and supporting humanitarian work, Sauerbrey said.

Post-September 11 changes in U.S. immigration laws have had the unintended effect of barring some victims of conflict and oppression from resettlement in the United States because they had a history of involvement in resistance activities, or were coerced to provide “material support” – as the law reads – to their persecutors.

Because of that legal stumbling block, the United States will not meet its target of admitting 54,000 refugees for resettlement in 2006, Sauerbrey said, even while officials attempt to resolve the issue justly.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice recently waived the security restrictions, allowing U.S. resettlement for several thousand members of the Karen, a Burmese ethnic minority living in a camp in Thailand.

Some refugees who will be admitted for resettlement in the United States this year represent a long-awaited solution to decades of statelessness. A State Department official announced June 19 that several thousand Meskhetian Turks will be sponsored for resettlement, more than a half a century after their ancestors were deported from their South Georgia homeland by Josef Stalin.

About 2.6 million refugees have gained permission to resettle in the United States in the last 30 years, according to State Department statistics. The United States is the leading international donor to refugee assistance, and sponsors more refugees for resettlement than any other nation.

For ongoing coverage of refugee issues, see Humanitarian Assistance and Refugees:
http://usinfo.state.gov/gi/global_issues/refugees.html

BUSH IMPOSES FINANCIAL SANCTIONS ON TOP BELARUSIAN OFFICIALS

Cites human rights abuses, assaults on democracy, corruption as justification

Washington -- President Bush has imposed targeted financial sanctions on Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko and nine other top officials in his government who share responsibility for undermining democratic processes or institutions in the former Soviet republic. The sanctions essentially freeze any assets Lukashenko and his closest associates have in the United States and bars U.S. citizens from doing business with them.

A White House statement released June 19 announcing the sanctions cited as justification the government’s human rights abuses, corruption and assaults on democracy, as well as the “fraudulent” presidential election in March and post-election repression of the opposition.

“These sanctions, imposed in coordination with targeted financial sanctions adopted by the European Union, indicate the international community’s intention to hold to account those responsible for abuses in Belarus,” the White House said.

In a separate letter to Congress concerning the executive order freezing assets, Bush also cited “the disappearances of four regime critics in 1999 and 2000, which the authorities have failed to investigate seriously despite credible information linking top government officials to these acts.”

“There is simply no place in a Europe whole and free for a regime of this kind,” Bush said.

The letter also states that corruption among top Belarusian officials threatens “important United States interests globally, including ensuring security and stability, the rule of law and core democratic values, advancing prosperity, and creating a level playing field for lawful business activities.”

On May 15, Bush banned travel to the United States by Lukashenko and those associated with his regime.

Three days later, the Council of the European Union froze all funds and assets of 36 Belarusian officials “responsible for the violations of international electoral standards and the crackdown on civil society and the democratic opposition” related to the March 19 presiden-

tial elections. These measures were adopted in addition to travel restrictions against Lukashenko and other Belarusian officials imposed by the council on April 10.

Bush's June 19 executive order prohibits U.S. companies and individuals from engaging in any transactions with the targeted persons.

Those named in addition to Lukashenko include not only such figures as the chairman of the Belarusian KGB and the minister of internal affairs, but also the head of the Belarusian State Television and Radio Company and the head of the Central Commission for Elections and National Referendums.

"The U.S. Government will continue to gather and review information regarding possible additional targets," the White House statement said.

U.S. AID AGENCY TO SUPPORT ALLIANCE TO FIGHT BIRD FLU IN VIETNAM

Alliance project will help train veterinarians in Thai Nguyen Province

By Cassie Duong
Washington File Staff Writer

Washington -- The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) will provide support for a new public-private alliance to help prevent avian influenza, or bird flu, in Vietnam, the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi said in a June 19 press release.

This alliance between agricultural businesses, the Vietnamese government, nongovernmental organizations and U.S. government agencies "highlights the effective and coordinated responses that are preventing an H5N1 pandemic in Vietnam by containing AI [avian influenza] in animals, and limiting its spread among people," the press release says.

According to the press release, the alliance will be starting a nine-month project to help veterinarians in Thai Nguyen Province improve their diagnosis of the disease, train veterinarians on epidemiological processes and tools, upgrade the government of Vietnam's animal health information systems, improve the bio-safety measures of small poultry farmers and provide national

dissemination of educational materials.

Although the highly pathogenic H5N1 strain of bird flu has resulted in 93 human infections in Vietnam since 2003 -- including 42 fatal cases -- the virus has yet to develop the capacity for efficient human-to-human transmission, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

However, experts now consider the disease to be endemic in parts of Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, China, and Thailand despite the death or destruction of approximately 150 million birds, the WHO said.

To date, USAID has contributed \$158 million to fight the disease. USAID programs focus on five key objectives for improved readiness and response capacity: planning and preparedness, surveillance, outbreak response, communications and stockpiling essential supplies and equipment.

USAID's efforts are one part of the U.S. government's multilevel response to the threat of avian and pandemic influenza.

In a recent meeting in Vienna, Austria, the United States announced it would provide another \$28 million to the International Partnership on Avian and Pandemic Influenza, an initiative to assist nations most severely affected by bird flu. This latest pledge pushes the total U.S. contribution to the effort to more than \$360 million.

Since the formation of the partnership, the United States has taken a number of steps to help countries contain or combat bird flu, including sending stockpiles of anti-viral medications to Asia in preparation for a human outbreak.

For more information on U.S. policies, see Bird Flu (Avian Influenza):
http://usinfo.state.gov/gi/global_issues/bird_flu.html

INTERNATIONAL HUNT IS ON FOR GENES AFFECTING HIV RESPONSE

Research will examine genetic differences among HIV-infected patients

Washington – Researchers from the United States, Europe and Australia are going to pool their access to patient groups in a large-scale analysis of HIV infected patients, hoping the shared knowledge will lead them to a better understanding of the body's response to the virus.

Led by scientists at North Carolina's Duke University, the collaboration announced June 20 will try to find out what the body's immune system is really doing during HIV infection, and try to use that knowledge to produce an effective vaccine. Of special interest are those rare HIV-infected individuals who control infection on their own, whose systems may provide a critical clue in vaccine development.

The work is led by the Center for HIV/AIDS Vaccine Immunology (CHAVI), established at Duke with a multimillion-dollar grant from the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), one of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), a federal agency for conducting and supporting medical research.

"We intend to use natural genetic differences among people to point the way toward the most promising avenue for vaccine development," said David Goldstein, director of CHAVI's genetic research. "We wanted to find out why some people naturally hold the virus down to almost undetectable levels while others lose control of it quickly."

The collaborators in EuroCHAVI, as the new effort is known, will be working to understand what genetic influences might cause the widely varying immune responses that individuals have after HIV infection, and the differences in susceptibility to infection.

The nine research groups involved in EuroCHAVI will recruit 600 HIV-infected patients from different countries and then use state-of-the-art genome technology to analyze the genetic factors that contribute to disease.

In a briefing conducted earlier this month, NIAID Director Anthony Fauci explained that the HIV virus "has an uncanny ability to elude the immune system under natural circumstances, which has made it very difficult to develop a vaccine."

Fauci made the remarks as the medical community noted the 25th anniversary of the first report of an unusual disease that would later come to be recognized as HIV/AIDS.

EuroCHAVI collaborators include the Swiss HIV cohort; the IRSICAixa study and the Clinic Hospital cohort in Spain; the Danish HIV cohort; the Perth-Western Australia cohort; the Modena cohort and the San Raffaele Scientific Institute cohort in Italy; the German National Competence Network for HIV/AIDS; and the Guy's, King's College and St. Thomas' Hospitals study in the United Kingdom. The University of Geneva, the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne and the University of Ioannina in Greece will partner as analytical centers.

For information on U.S. policies and programs, see HIV/AIDS:

http://usinfo.state.gov/gi/global_issues/hiv_aids.html

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